Toxic Family Dynamics and Complex Trauma

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The wound of being ‘too intense’

What is Toxic Family Dynamics? Toxic Family Dynamics come in various forms and can damage a child’s development in visible and invisible ways. *Some of the toxic family dynamics that sensitive/ intense children can get locked into include: Having depressed or emotionally blank parents, having controlling parents, enmeshment, having to step up as ‘little adults’, having to face parents’ envy, and being scapegoated as the black sheep*. On this page, we will explain these dynamics one by one, and explain how they can cause Complex Trauma or Complex PTSD.

What is Complex PTSD? Complex trauma, o*r Complex PTSD*, results from a series of repeated, often 'invisible' childhood experiences of maltreatment, abuse, neglect, and situations in which the child has little or no control or any perceived hope to escape. Growing up in an environment full of unpredictability, danger, parental inconsistencies, or emotional abandonment, these individuals are left with 'hidden traumas' that disrupt not only their psychological but also neurological and emotional development. These invisible forms of trauma is what we call Complex Trauma, or Complex PTSD.

Complex Trauma, the Invisible Trauma (Complex PTSD)

In the past, psychologists have typically focused more on the impact of 'shock trauma' from extreme events such as accidents, wars and natural disasters. However, there is a second type of trauma that is very real and pervasive, yet not captured by the traditional diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The term **Complex PTSD** describes chronic childhood trauma, such as emotional neglect or parentification, that is invisible in nature.

It is easy to recognize when a child is explicitly, physically or sexually abused, but the impact of having inadequate or deficient parents can be elusive and escape our collective awareness. Sometimes the trauma could even be about what your caregivers did not do (omission) rather than what they did (commission).

Unfortunately, unlike shock trauma or physical abuse, the psychological injuries caused by **emotional abandonment or alienation** are often invisible and unacknowledged. This may leave these children to feel confused, assume that their traumatic experiences are not valid, and turn to blaming and shaming themselves. Even as adults, they may suppress or deny these painful memories by dismissively comparing their trauma to that of others who were more 'noticeably' abused.

Growing research has found that a wide array of psychological difficulties find their roots in these chronic childhood relational and attachment injuries. Children who experience this type of trauma show a disrupted ability to regulate their emotions, behaviors and attention, and these symptoms often extend into adulthood, leading to clinical presentations including Bipolar Disorder, ADHD, Borderline Personality Disorder, and even chronic physical pain (APA, 2007).

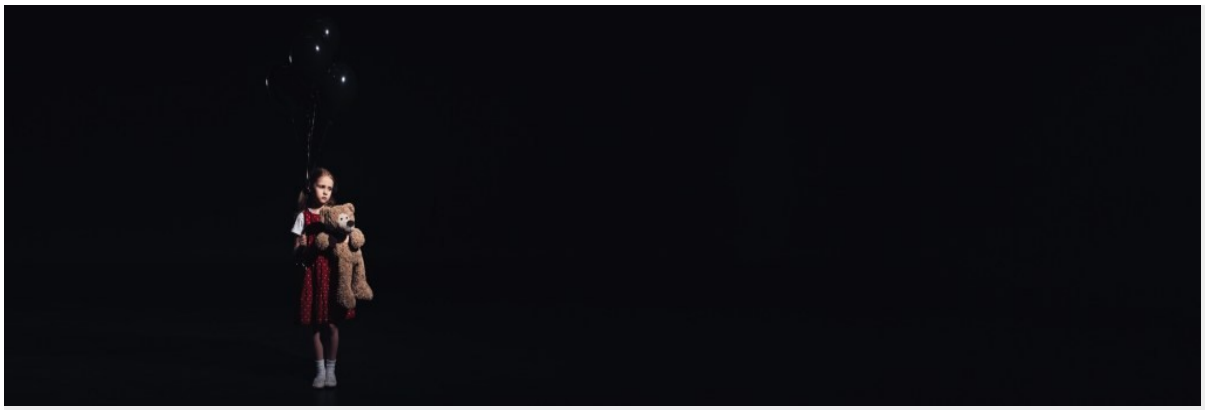
Complex Trauma and the Highly Sensitive, Intense and Gifted

When it comes to emotionally intense, sensitive, and gifted individuals, we ought to be cautious of the confines of categories and diagnoses. Far too often, the most creative, forward, and independent thinking people are being misunderstood, mislabelled, and misdiagnosed.

Being sensitive does not equal vulnerability. Highly sensitive people are innately porous and receptive to their environment, making them painfully aware of not just physical sensations, sounds, and touch, but also relational experiences such as warmth or indifference. In critical, undermining settings, they may devolve into despair, but— and this is important to note— in a supportive and nurturing environment, they thrive like no others.

It is true that because of their unique ways of perceiving the world, they are acutely aware of and have more intense internal responses towards existing problems in their early lives, which may exacerbate the impact of any developmental deficits and trauma. However, sensitive children respond to not just the negative but also the positive. They may be more prone to upsets and physical sensitivities, but they also possess the capacity to be unusually vital, creative, and successful.

In other words, the intense and sensitive ones are not born 'vulnerable'**, they are simply more responsive to their environments**, and therefore, more likely to be negatively impacted by toxic family dynamics. But with the right kind of knowledge, support, and nurture, potentially through therapy and coaching, even if this means replenishing what one did not get in childhood later on in adulthood, they can thrive.



But when she was scared, she was a child again, and she was more afraid of being a child again than anything else in her life.”
— Tamsyn Muir

Toxic Family Dynamics and the Intense, Highly Sensitive and Gifted

Being the parent of a sensitive and emotionally gifted child has its own rewards. However, parents need to be very mature and highly aware. Many do not have all that it takes. Most of the time, parents do not exploit or abuse their sensitive children on purpose – their limited understanding or experience simply gets the best of them.

The families of emotionally intense children typically end up addressing the situation in one of two ways; they allow themselves to love the child, however painstakingly, or they reject the child for his or her strangeness. In an experiment conducted by Andrew Solomon, involving interviews with over 400 families, it was observed that in the case of having atypical children, would-be good parents were extraordinary, going the extra mile if the need arose, and the would-be bad parents were downright abusive. He concluded that having an exceptional child exaggerates parental tendencies.

Complex trauma caused by a toxic family dynamic is detrimental because it is usually **invisible**. On the surface, we look just fine. We were provided with all the material things we needed; clothing, food etc. But the way that we feel inside does not coincide with what our appearance portrays. There is

sometimes pressure to keep up the illusion of a “normal happy child from a normal happy family”. Our parents and society tell us we are well, but the fact that we did not feel this way growing up makes us confused.

“Trauma is personal. It does not disappear if it is not validated. When it is ignored or invalidated the silent screams continue internally heard only by the one held captive.”
— Danielle Bernock

Toxic Family Dynamic 1: Scapegoating

When emotionally sensitive children were born into neuro-typical families, it was difficult for the family to understand them. As such, they quickly became the cast away; “the different one” or the “difficult child”.

It takes a lot of patience, maturity, and strength to bring up an intense and emotionally sensitive child. However, due to all sorts of reasons, from trauma to emotional incapacities, not all families can do this. In a healthy family, there should be enough freedom for each member to express themselves as individuals. But in families with little tolerance for differences, the child becomes the scapegoat; the black sheep of the family.

Being scapegoated may not mean that our family did not love us. Usually, people resort to making a scapegoat of an individual to avoid dealing with their own emotional turmoil. As soon as someone is scapegoated, the family will try to make it stay that way so that they do not have to deal with their own problems or vulnerabilities. When we try to change or leave, we may be emotionally blackmailed or manipulated.

The following may indicate you have been scapegoated:

You were criticized for innate attributes or characteristics such as sensitivity and intensity.

Name tags such as “weird”, “trouble” etc.

You receive unequal treatment compared to your siblings.

Your mistakes or errors were blown out of proportion and were punished more than necessary.

You were not paid enough attention when bullied.

No one cared enough to know or understand or listen to you.

Your family dismissed or downsized your achievements.

Once adopted, we find this scapegoat role difficult to shake, even as an adult. We may carry this assumed identity all of our lives.

While we may intellectually understand later in life that we were not the cause of the family problems, shifting from self-loathing to self-love requires profound emotional healing. We must know we were never the cause of chaos in the family; neither were we responsible for solving any problems. To heal, the child in us must go from being in denial to anger to finally finding freedom and release.

(Here is a Full Article on what it means to be framed as the Black Sheep of the family and how you can cope)

Toxic Family Dynamic 2: Parentification

Parental guidance and protection are crucial in developing a sense of safety and foundation within our psyche. Some parents, however, cannot provide this due to insufficient emotional resources. If this is the case, the parent-child roles are reversed; the child becomes the parent, and the parent becomes the child. This parent-child role reversal is known as parentification, which can form a toxic family dynamic.

Generally, there are two types of parentification. Emotional parentification happens when the child becomes the parent's emotional support. This could occur when a parent shares the innermost details of their anxieties and worries with the child – intimate details the child is really too young to process.

Instrumental parentification is when the child engages in physical labor and support in the household, such as doing the housework, cooking, cleaning, taking care of younger siblings, and other "adult" responsibilities.

Of the two types, emotional parentification has the direst consequences in terms of childhood development. In psychological terms, it is considered a form of abuse, exploitation, and neglect that is difficult to respond to. Some experts even call this 'emotional incest.'

Parentification can happen in several ways; **the parent was behaving child-like, confiding in the child on sensitive matters, or relating with the child as a peer or close friend.** If we had been put in these situations, we would feel obliged to step up to the role in order to deserve the parent's love. The effects on our sense of self-worth and our idea about love are far-reaching, though not immediately apparent.

Parentification is a boundary violation. You were forced to grow up faster than you should. You had nobody to look up to or rely on for guidance. You had to learn and accept that your needs would not be met and that having your own dreams and desires was not acceptable. As a result, you learn to shove your feelings down. You learn to deny your innermost thoughts and ignore your own needs so you can avoid disappointing your parents.

When parentified, you had to parent your siblings as well. You might end up feeling as if you fell short or like you failed because, by default, it is impossible for a child to perfectly fill the role of a parent. You may also feel guilty when you have to leave home (e.g. when you go to college and have to 'leave our siblings behind'). Psychologically, you feel like a parent walking out on their children.

There is no way we could have helped our parents with their emotional pains or many dissatisfactions with their lives. You believe it was your fault and that you were not enough. This affects you even as you grow into adults. You have an overly obligated sense of responsibility in relationships and may overcompensate for this. You do not learn to say "no" or to recognize when to stop giving. You are always too eager to help or rescue other people from pain and might be attracted to partners that take more than they give. Eventually, you can become emotionally drained and fatigued.

What makes the situation worse is your difficulties in getting angry at your parents. When we were parentified, we intellectually understood that they did not mean to be abusive and were just limited or vulnerable. As sensitive children, you felt very compassionate and protective of your parents. This protective instinct hinders you from admitting the truth of what you have been deprived of.

Ongoing research has proven that this sort of abuse is a risk factor in a child's normal development, this is why it is considered a toxic family dynamic. It leaves deep emotional wounds that endure into adulthood. Behavioral manifestations that begin in childhood tend to become worse in adulthood, making it challenging to maintain healthy relationships.

As the primary caregiver for your parents and siblings, there is often no emotional support, no safety net. For the most part, you were expected to keep it together and never show signs of distress. As adults, you may have trouble saying "no" to people. You are often unable to express anger and have a hard time trusting others.

(Here is a Full Article on what it means to be Parentified and how you can cope)

"Dissociation is the common response of children to repetitive, overwhelming trauma and holds the untenable knowledge out of awareness"

Judith Spencer

Toxic Family Dynamic 3: Having Emotionally Unavailable Parents

Some caregivers can be emotionally unresponsive to their children due to mental illness, limited psychological capacity, work or health demands, and neuro-atypical traits like Asperger's syndrome, ADHD, or autism. This unresponsiveness, in turn, makes the children feel shut out and abandoned.

Parents need to acknowledge children's expression for them to develop a sense of self-worth. This is done through a process called **mirroring**. Children need to feel wanted and welcomed by their parents. To achieve this, parents applaud a child, encourage them and converse with them in an affirmative way.

Sure, a parent cannot be there for the child at all times. A parent has work or other commitments to attend to. But as a baseline, we receive enough mirroring experiences to build a foundation. If we have received sufficient mirroring as a child, we will have enough memories to draw from and no longer require constant reassurance. We will grow up with a good sense of self-worth and an ability to self- regulate. If, however, we have not had enough mirroring experience, the development of our internal-mirroring can be hindered, and part of our psyche remains child-like and dysregulated.

In the Still Face Experiment by Edward Tronick in 1975 (there is a short, provocative video clip on Youtube) which demonstrates the process and importance of mirroring, a mother is asked to keep a blank face and ignore the child's attempt to engage her. The child "rapidly sobered and grew wary" on getting no response from the mother. After several failed attempts, he resigned and turned away, looking hopeless. These events occurred quite quickly, such that they could have gone unnoticed. The experiment shows that we learn to regulate emotions by mirroring. Babies only learn to manage and regulate how they feel when they have other people as mirrors.

This skill is particularly crucial for empathetic children. You are likely to have an active mirror neuron system that makes you more prone to emotional contagion and being affected by other people's feelings. It is easy for you to get overwhelmed by other people when you cannot self-regulate.

Adults in some families may disapprove of children with scorn when we try to connect with them. This emotional neglect takes a substantial toll. We do not easily forget these hurtful events and undo the impact of the toxic family dynamic.

Toxic Family Dynamic 4: Enmeshment

According to Separation-Individual theory (1975), babies have a natural symbiotic relationship with their mothers at birth. However, they still need to have a sense of self and know their mothers as a different entity from them in order to develop healthily. Some parents have a hard time letting go and separating themselves from their children, usually due to their own insecurities or unfulfilled lives. This eventually denies the child opportunities to take risks, explore, make productive mistakes and become resilient.

Anxious parents may subtly send emotional messages to their children like **“I cannot survive without you”, “don’t go”, “don’t grow up”, “you can’t go”, “you can’t make it without me”, “it’s a dangerous world out there”.**

Often, these parents’ need to maintain control comes from their fear of being dispensable. They may try and use the child to fill a void they feel from being displeased with their own lives or relationships. Alice Miller, in her seminal work, **“The Drama of The Gifted Child”**, explains this particular complex trauma. On having a child, the parent may feel as though she finally has someone who will love her unconditionally and proceed to use the child to fulfil her own need to be wanted (the female pronoun is used in old psychoanalytical texts. We should be careful not to preserve this mother-blaming culture). We can imagine why it is tempting for the parents to use an empathic child as a confidant— they are loving, perceptive, and sensitive. They can sense when their parents feel down even before they actually do.

When our parents’ needs override our own need to be independent, we develop an identity that is tailored to suit them. After all, we were afraid of losing their love. This results in **enmeshment**— a relationship where people become excessively involved with each other. In enmeshment, family

boundaries are blurred or non-existent. A switch in someone's mood quickly affects the whole family. Since you did not grow up with firm emotional boundaries, you struggle to set them as adults. You have a blurred sense of identity and find it difficult to differentiate between your feeling and the feelings of those close to you. You feel an obligation to help others, sometimes compulsively. It may be difficult for you to have balanced relationships.

Enmeshment is an insidious, toxic family dynamic because it often occurs under the guise of love, loyalty, family, or unity, which makes it even more deceptive. Rather than love or family, it comes from a place of fear. A truly loving family encourages the young ones to be independent, to be a "self" rather than an "us". A child should not feel like there is a condition upon which they are loved. Parents should not feel like their children are their only source of happiness, fulfilment, or wellbeing.

Enmeshment is not a malicious scheme by parents. This toxic family dynamic often is a family pattern, passed down from generations. Parents are usually not even aware that they are enmeshing their young ones; they only are repeating a cycle.

Toxic Family Dynamic 5: Competition and Oppression

Parenthood comes with an array of emotions; anger, joy, grief, pride, and so on. While it is not commonplace to talk about it in society, jealousy is one of these emotions that parents can feel towards their children. When this envy is unmanaged, it becomes a toxic family dynamic and erodes the health of the whole family system.

Parents with unfulfilling lives may be particularly threatened by seeing what their children have— opportunities that were not available to them in their youth. As they watch their children grow, their childhood wounds are reopened, and they go back psychologically to when they themselves were children. Sometimes, parents even begin to perceive their children as competitors.

This becomes a paradox. On one hand, parents genuinely want their children to succeed. On the other hand, they feel

intimidated seeing their children more beautiful and more successful than they were or are. They may feel betrayed as the child becomes more independent, considering how much time and energy they had sacrificed for the child. Parents who are not self-conscious may exhibit their resentment and envy in dysfunctional ways. They may give their children backhanded or sarcastic compliments, subtle criticism, or even more direct attacks and scorn.

Generally, parents are their children's first role models. However, when role models insult us for our accomplishments or put us down, we begin to develop low self-esteem and hate ourselves. As adults, we may **feel very guilty or ashamed of our successes in life.** We may even sabotage ourselves, stay average, and purposely underachieve.

Carl Jung explains that nothing has a stronger psychological influence on children than the unlived lives of parents. Although it does not justify how they behave, most competitive parents at a point in their childhood were victims of a toxic family dynamic or deprivation. They find it difficult to give positive feedback to their children because they never had it themselves.

"Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin."

— Mother Teresa

7 Signs that you have Complex Trauma form Toxic Family Dynamics

What Happens When We Bury The Truth About Toxic Family Dynamics?

1. You Become Dissociated and Feel Dead Inside

Cumulative complex trauma caused by toxic family dynamics has the power to force our childhood into foreclosure. Our true self is the part of us that is free, spontaneous, and fully alive. But having been emotionally abandoned by our caretakers, we have also learned to bury our true selves. Such disconnection comes not from one single traumatic experience, but from an accumulation of painful emotional memories— when our enthusiasm was met with coldness, our passion misunderstood, our feelings silenced or our actions punished. The innocent, most alive part of us- our Soul, our True Self, or our Inner Child- is forced into hiding.

Because the repeated emotional abuse or neglect from toxic family dynamics was so painful, you had no choice but to dissociate. Your numbing may involve disconnection from the body, your emotions, and other people. You can continue to function in the outside world but don't feel connected. You hide from your passion, spontaneous aliveness, and the ability to be vulnerable. You observe everything with intellectual curiosity but remain distanced. The result is an emptiness that derails your sense of being. Deep down, you may feel guilty for having forsaken your truths.

2. You May Feel Defective

Children naturally blame themselves for what happens to them.

When they are bullied, they believe it is because they are not good enough.

If they seek attention from their parents but are neglected, they believe they are too needy.

If they are burdened with demands that they cannot fulfil, they believe it is their failure—to be a perfect child, to take good care of their siblings, to soothe their parents' anger. This plants a seed for the complex trauma that follows.

If, as an intense child, you were scapegoated as the 'problematic one'- the one who was 'too much, 'too sensitive', the origin of all woes in the household- you would believe you are at fault and internalize a sense defectiveness. You then believe that you are disgusting, ugly, stupid, or flawed. The toxic shame binds you with beliefs such as 'nothing I do is good enough', 'there is something wrong with me', 'I am bad and toxic'.

Toxic shame makes you think you deserve little and need to settle for less. It stops you from fulfilling your potential as you hold yourself back from opportunities.

3. You May Become Highly Anxious

If our parents are emotionally unstable, or if due to their vulnerabilities we feel the need to take care of them, we become the 'little adult' at home. We are hyper-vigilant, always watching out for the smallest clues about our parents' emotional fluctuations so that we can protect ourselves and our siblings. Hyper empathic tendency that is a result of Complex Trauma doesn't go away, and we carry it into adulthood.

Our nervous system remains in a continual state of high arousal. We may feel we cannot relax and have to always look out for danger. We may be irritable and jumpy, suffer from insomnia, other anxiety-related disorders, and obsessive-compulsive tendencies. In this case, the OC tendency is not an innate trait, but a result of having suffered toxic family dynamics.

Our bodies store traumatic memories more than our mind does. As a result of childhood complex trauma, we feel ungrounded

and uncentered. We are like frightened children living in adult bodies; when unexpected things happen, we are overwhelmed and feel close to breaking down.

4. You May Resort To Compulsion And Addiction To Cope

Our brain is designed to protect us; when we come across a particularly difficult or traumatic situation, it will be stored in a way that is 'frozen in time' as complex trauma. We may not even remember it. We are not sure what triggers us, but our suppressed memories come out in the form of uncontrollable mood swings, persistent sadness, depression, and explosive anger.

Through addictive behaviours of any form, from drinking, spending, eating to compulsive sex, we try to either A) Numb away the pain that we try so hard not to feel, or B) Fill the inner void. However, this can escalate into a compulsive cycle, for the numbing/filling effect from these external agents never lasts long, and the moment their effect ceases, we reach for more. It is a dead-end escape route that never leads anywhere.

5. You Are Fearful Of Intimacy And Love

If you have been trapped by toxic family dynamics for a long time, potentially, trust, interdependence, and acceptance all require a degree of vulnerability that your wounded skin finds too hard to bear.

If you did not feel welcomed into the world, you may always feel like an outcast, someone with no hope of finding belongingness in the world. All our life, you are caught between the intense need for kinship and the extreme fear of contact.

After having been betrayed by those who were supposed to love and support you, you may unconsciously decide that you can no longer take any pain and disappointment. You think if you stop hoping or believing in anything or anyone, you can avoid the

inevitable letdown. Instilled in your subconscious is the belief that it is risky to have hope and expectations, so to avoid disappointment you don't attach to anyone or anything. Suppressing painful memories consumes a tremendous amount of energy. If you bury your betrayal complex trauma without processing it, you may relate to the world through the lens of grudge and suspicion and push people away.

On the other hand, if you grew up in a chaotic household, or if your parents were overprotective or overbearing, you may now fear being smothered, losing control, or losing a sense of individuality. We fear being asked for too much, and thus distance ourselves and withhold.

Retreating from closeness does not necessarily mean isolating ourselves entirely, but we may feel the need to conceal parts of our authentic selves. On the surface, we are social, but we don't get close to anyone. Or maybe we settle for false-closeness in sex but never commit to knowing anyone in depth. We hide our passionate, loving self, and become cold, cynical, and sarcastic. Withdrawing into our shells whenever we feel vulnerable also means not being able to take in support and love from others.

Eventually, we lose hope in finding anyone who can understand us.

6. You Damage The Love You Have

Neuroscientists have found that parents' responses to our attachment-seeking behaviors, especially during the first two years of our lives, encode our view of the world. If as infants, we have consistent attachment interactions with an attuned, available, and nurturing caregiver, we will be able to develop a sense of safety and trust. In contrast, when our parents are emotionally unavailable to us, we internalize the message that the world is a frightening place; when we are in need, no one will be there. This forms a complex trauma that is too hard to bear.

This results in deep fear of abandonment. As adults, any kind of distance, even a brief and benign one, may trigger you to re-experience the original pain of being left alone, dismissed, or disdained. Your fear could trigger coping survival modes such as denial, clinging, avoidance, dismissing others, lashing out in relationships, or the pattern of sabotaging relationships to avoid potential rejection.

Fear of rejection or abandonment may also cause you to put up with a damaging relationship or stay in an abusive one. The message that you received from your toxic family dynamics unhealed wounds tells you that being mistreated or degraded is still better than being on your own.

7. You Sabotage Your Success

The toxic family dynamic might have led you to believe your success and happiness would threaten your siblings, attract envy, and somehow brand you as ‘arrogant’ if you were high-achieving. Perhaps your parents were too limited in their worldview to comprehend your gifts, and deep down you carry a ‘survivor guilt’ that says if you achieve more than others or outgrow your family, you are betraying them. Subconsciously, you become frightened of your power.

Expecting little of ourselves and others may have made sense when we were little people who lived at the mercy of unpredictable and explosive caregivers, but that expectation no longer serves us if we wish to step into a more prominent place and live fully. You do not need to be trapped by what has happened in a toxic family dynamic that was not your making.

Specific Goals When Healing From Toxic Family Dynamics

The bouncing back process for Complex trauma is different from therapy for non-complex PTSD, general depression, or anxiety.

Because of the complicated issues around a personal sense of safety and stability, being exposed to traumatic materials before you are ready can lead to re-traumatization, and reinforce the cycle of hopelessness. **Themes such as safety, mourning, and reconnection are some of the key themes specific to the process of bouncing back from toxic family dynamics**. The following are some of the healing goals that are essential:

- **Locating or developing an internal sense of safety**
- **Processing the impact of the toxic family dynamics and the emotions that follow without being overwhelmed.**
- **Building connection with self, the body, and emotions- through mindfulness and other mind-body techniques**

- **Expanding the ‘window of tolerance for various emotions, so you are not constantly in either a state of hyper-arousal (acute stress, rage, tension, and panic) or under-arousal (dissociating, disconnecting, feeling empty and depressed)**
- **Finding ways to cope when feeling overwhelmed, without resorting to avoidance or compensatory behaviours (overeating, overspending, and other impulsive habits)**
- **Learning to experience connection with others as enriching rather than tiring or threatening**
- **Becoming aware of and finding ways to preserve your energetic boundaries**
- **Neurologically regulating the nervous system in order to cope with day-to-day stressors and triggers**
- **Lessening the impact of your internalized shame, and the voice of the inner critic.**

Toxic Family Dynamics Do Not Have To Follow You Forever

All that has been said so far may be disconcerting. Having to read about the impact of toxic family dynamics can even be painful.

It is possible that you had hope and you were disappointed but kept on hoping nevertheless. Or that you were hurt and betrayed but still believe in love. It is natural to feel confused by the diverse emotions that you have for the family that could not understand you.

From the point of view of human evolution, the bond we form with our parents or caregivers is one of life-or-death and so, the idea that these people we totally depend upon can fail us, or that we can disappoint them, is terrifying. We have historically suppressed any anger or resentment we felt towards our parents because that was the only way for us to survive.

Despite becoming adults, many of us still experience an estranged relationship with anger.

We find ways to rationalize or justify the rage we feel because we are threatened by it. We say “they did the best they could” to downplay our pain.

Most of us do not feel safe enough to handle our rage and spend much of ourselves trying to drown it. We may binge eat or numb ourselves, become aggressive towards ourselves or fall into depression. Sometimes, the bottled-up rage in us explodes unexpectedly, and we sabotage our current relationships with those we love.

Anger is a universal energy. It needs to be acknowledged in order to be released from your system.

Anger is not the same as blame.

There is a hidden belief that comes with anger: “someone must have done something wrong”. This follows that “if no one else did anything wrong, then it must have been me. I must be at fault”.

In truth, blame does not have to follow anger.

We may consider separating our parents’ toxic behaviour and the toxic family dynamics they created from the people they are from a spiritual perspective. Perhaps we can try and understand that their dysfunctions come from the pain that they inherited. We can see them as ill-equipped humans rather than ‘our parents’. They are fellow people affected by a universal, inescapable pain.

We can also try and remember that although the pain we feel seems very personal, we are independent of it.

Sometimes, we are only sharing part of a collective, universal human suffering, some of which was simply passed down to us.

You are not toxic, and you are not the toxic family dynamic.
Your history does not make you.

Your trauma does not define you.

You are not our past.